

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-595](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In the U.S. there have been over 29 million cumulative reported cases of COVID-19 and about 524,000 reported deaths, as of March 23, 2021. Public health officials have recommended social distancing and other steps to reduce the spread of the disease, but air marshals often work on planes where they cannot fully adopt these measures. The CARES Act included a provision for GAO to conduct monitoring and oversight of the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report examines (1) how many air marshals have been diagnosed with COVID-19; (2) FAMS's steps to protect air marshals' health; and (3) how FAMS adapted its operations during the pandemic.

GAO analyzed FAMS data on COVID-19 cases among employees, reviewed agency guidance, analyzed FAMS flight operations reports, and interviewed FAMS leadership as well as air marshals at a non-generalizable sample of three field offices selected for variation in number of COVID-19 cases, among other things. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in May 2021. Information that DHS deemed sensitive has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAMS (1) consistently document steps taken in response to an employee's diagnosis with COVID-19 and (2) routinely facilitate employee access to testing for COVID-19. DHS concurred with both of GAO's recommendations and identified actions it will take to implement them.

View [GAO-21-595](#). For more information, contact Triana McNeil at (202) 512-6691 or McNeilT@gao.gov.

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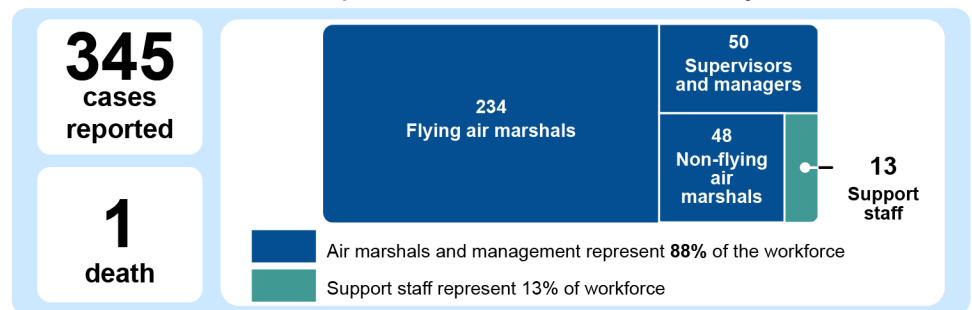
COVID-19

Federal Air Marshal Service Should Document Its Response to Cases and Facilitate Access to Testing

What GAO Found

The U.S. Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), reported 345 cases of COVID-19 among employees, as of January 31, 2021.

Federal Air Marshal Service's Reported Cases of COVID-19, as of January 31, 2021



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Air Marshal Service data. | GAO-21-595

Note: Cases included in the figure were confirmed with a positive COVID-19 test and reported to the Federal Air Marshal Service by the employee.

To protect air marshals from COVID-19, FAMS provided supplies like N95 masks and implemented new telework and leave policies. FAMS also created protocols for responding to employees with COVID-19, but has not consistently documented their implementation. By doing so, FAMS could better ensure it is taking the required steps to protect employees and the flying public. GAO also found FAMS does not routinely facilitate employee access to COVID-19 testing. FAMS recommends employees seek testing through their medical provider or local public health officials, but air marshals in all three field offices GAO met with either noted barriers to testing or benefits to improved access to tests. In January 2021, FAMS employees became eligible for COVID-19 vaccinations, but Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance says testing continues to be important even as vaccinations become available. By facilitating access to testing, FAMS could better ensure employee health and continued operations.

Starting in February 2020, FAMS adjusted the number and types of flights air marshals covered. In April 2020, amidst a decline in U.S. carrier flights, the number of flights FAMS covered declined by 90 percent compared to average monthly flights pre-pandemic. By June 2020, FAMS had resumed pre-pandemic flight levels. From April through August 2020, FAMS made operational changes to increase its flight coverage that also resulted in FAMS covering different types of flights, compared to those it covered prior to the pandemic. For example, due to travel restrictions, FAMS stopped covering most international flights but increased coverage of other types of flights. Starting in April 2020, FAMS also increased air marshals' non-flight work, such as providing a security presence at airports and national events.